

**Amanda Keim**

[Ahwatukee Foothills News](#)

Arlen Sykes used to direct airplanes in the Navy. Now, he directs a class of fifth-grade students.

Sykes, who has taught at Kyrene de la Colina Elementary School for the past 10 years after putting in 17 years as a Navy air traffic controller, is one of the approximately 13,000 teachers across the country who transitioned into the classroom after a military career through the Troops to Teachers program.

Sixty-five of those teachers are in Arizona's 5th congressional district, which covers Ahwatukee Foothills, Tempe, Scottsdale and part of Mesa.

Rep. Harry Mitchell, (D-Ariz.), a former teacher himself, stopped by Colina Thursday to visit Sykes' classroom and bring attention to the Troops to Teachers enhancement act making its way through Congress.

Troops to Teachers fills several needs, including supporting members of the military, attracting new teachers with backgrounds in math- and science-related fields and strengthening the workforce, Mitchell said.

Mitchell pointed to Sykes as just one example of someone successfully translating their service to the country into the classroom. Even the posters around Sykes' classroom included tokens to his aviation background, Mitchell pointed out.

"It's important to find people who have the tools and resources to become teachers," Mitchell said.

That aviation knowledge also found its way into a lesson on Thursday. Sykes, his teacher's ID swinging on a Navy lanyard around his neck, showed clips of a Web video displaying air traffic across the United States at different points in the morning. He paused the video frequently, asking the students things like why they could see more planes flying in over the East Coast early in the morning while the West Coast was relatively still.

Joining the military was a natural choice for Sykes, whose father had been in the Air Force.

As Sykes was getting ready to retire, it was a military career officer who suggested he would be a good fit as a teacher. Sykes had some experience teaching in Navy facilities and enjoyed it, so he went with the recommendation to get a teaching certificate.

Sykes was hesitant about getting a teaching job at first, thinking he should find a career that would let him make more money. But he ultimately entered the classroom and has become immersed in it.

"I look for a void and find a way to fill it," Sykes said.

Which is how he ended up starting a student aviation club. Sykes also campaigned to get the whole staff at Colina CPR and first aid certified.

When some of his students said they were interested in learning first aid, too, he started a baby sitting club that helps teach students those life-saving skills.

Sykes enjoys the classroom, but the best part of teaching usually comes once his students have been out of his classroom for a few years and then come back to see him, he said.

Several former students have told Sykes about successes they've had. And when Sykes congratulates them, they turn that compliment around.

"They say, 'I owe it to you,'" Sykes said. "You must be doing something right if you're making a positive difference in a child's life."

The Troops to Teachers enhancement act would help put more retired service members into teaching positions, said John Scheuer, state program manager for Arizona. The current program includes a \$5,000 stipend to help with certification expenses, job placement assistance and a possible \$10,000 if new teachers commit at least three years to serving in a school that has a high number of low-income families.

The enhancements would reduce the amount of military service needed to be eligible for the program from six years to 90 days, expand the list of high-need schools former troops could teach in to receive the \$10,000 bonus and create an advisory panel to recommend future changes to the program, Scheuer said.

Sykes said he hopes more veterans decide to take advantage of Troops to Teachers and join him in the classroom.

"I'm only one guy. I'm only one veteran," Sykes said. "This is what I bring to the table."